

USAF IN THE SINAI IN THE 1967 WAR: FACT OR FICTION?

RICHARD B. PARKER

This is an inquiry into the allegation that the United States Air Force flew reconnaissance missions for the Israelis during the 1967 June War as related in a book called Taking Sides by Stephen Green. After retracing Green's steps and tracking a good number of leads, the author concludes that the story is untrue.

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS about the 1967 June War that remain to be answered satisfactorily: Why did the Soviets give the Egyptians a false warning about Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian border? Why did Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir think Egypt was ready to confront Israel militarily? What were the Syrians up to? Why did the Israelis attack the *U.S.S. Liberty*?

There is another episode that, if it happened, would imply a degree of U.S. collusion in the Israeli attack on Egypt that went far beyond what any serious scholar has been willing to consider. William Quandt in *Peace Process* and in an article in the Spring 1992 *Middle East Journal* has given what has become the most thorough and authoritative answer in this regard.¹ He concludes that by the end of May 1967, President Lyndon Johnson reluctantly acquiesced in what Israel was about to do. Accusations by Patrick Seale,² Andrew and Leslie Cockburn,³ Mohamed Hassanein Heikal,⁴ and others that the U.S. government actively set up the Egyptians and colluded with Israel in the attack have been denied, with conviction, by officials involved with foreign policy at the time.⁵

Most of the accusations made by Heikal and the others rest on vague circumstantial evidence, post hoc fallacies, and hearsay supported by popular beliefs about the devious activities of James Angleton, the strange man who had the Israeli account at the CIA. One could posit any kind of plot as coming from him and people would believe it; since he was very secretive and is now dead, it is hard to prove that he did *not* do anything one wants to imagine. There is also the deviousness of Lyndon Johnson, as revealed in the Tonkin Gulf affair, among other things, which can be invoked to substantiate the conspiracy theory of one's choice. And certainly nothing, or very little, could be put past the Israelis (or the Arabs) when it comes to plotting. That is all one needs to construct a conspiratorial explanation for what happened in 1967, and it fits very well with the growing popular cynicism about the mo-

RICHARD B. PARKER is a scholar-in-residence at the Middle East Institute in Washington. He is the editor of *The Six Day War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).

tives and honesty of the American government and its leaders. There is very little in the way of direct, hard evidence in these stories, however, and while the Arabs have had good reason to suspect the activities of Western intelligence agencies, which have cooperated with the Israelis more closely than with the Arabs, they have not had much more than suspicion to go on.

One of the few authors to provide details of a U.S.-Israeli collusion is Stephen Green. In his 1984 book *Taking Sides*,⁶ Green describes a reconnaissance operation allegedly flown for the Israelis over Egypt, Jordan, and Syria from a base in the Negev throughout the June War by aircraft of the Thirty-eighth Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (TRS) based at Ramstein, Germany, supported by photo technicians from the Seventeenth TRS from Upper Heyford, England. The men involved were allegedly "rousted from bed" and taken to an air base at Morón, Spain, where they were put into civilian clothes and issued civilian passports. Their aircraft were painted with Israeli markings, and they were sent off to the Negev on the eve of the war. When the war was over, they were returned to their home units after having been debriefed and put back into uniform in Spain.

Such an operation could not have been mounted overnight. Weeks of advance planning would have been required. Assuming that such planning had been done on a contingency basis, a decision to put it into operation would still have been required before the famous Israeli kitchen cabinet decided on 3 June to strike on 5 June, and it would have required the complaisance and cooperation of senior officers in the U.S. Air Force. In other words, if the story were true, senior U.S. officials and military officers would have had to have been aware well in advance of, and connived in, Israel's plans to strike at Egypt on or about 5 June, and American forces would have had to have been prepositioned on the ground and participated in that strike. This scenario would also imply that, in spite of all the contemporary testimony to the contrary, the 3 June Israeli kitchen cabinet story was pure window dressing and that the decision to strike on 5 June had been taken well before that meeting. Could any of this be possible?

The legal and political implications of such an operation would be very serious. It would not be just the airmen and ground crews whose lives would have been put at risk for no discernible interest of the United States and for very minimal military benefit to Israel; the lives of all Americans living and working in the Arab world would have been endangered. We can imagine the congressional and popular reaction in the United States had one of the planes crashed and its pilot been captured and paraded through the streets of Cairo. Was it possible that President Johnson would have taken such a risk?

DOUBTS

Although many of my colleagues have been inclined to believe that there must be some truth to the story, I have always been skeptical, primarily be-

cause there is no obvious bureaucratic trace of it. The men and equipment required for such an operation could not be moved without orders, flight clearances, policy approval, and expenditure of funds that would surface sooner or later. Furthermore, the conventional wisdom in Washington is that nothing this sensitive can remain secret for long. Green's story could be considered that inevitable leak, but his sources were not named and there was no reaction to the story in the major media. Journalists apparently shared the general skepticism among serious students of the area that such an irresponsible operation could have been mounted without leaving a trace.

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Nevertheless, something someone said to me in 1992 prompted me to see what I could learn about the story. I began by locating the commander of the Thirty-eighth TRS, retired Col. Thomas Whitlock. Four RF-4C aircraft (the reconnaissance model of the F-4 that was the hottest item in our aircraft inventory at the time) from his squadron allegedly participated in the operation. He maintained with compelling conviction that he knew of no such operation and that these aircraft could not have been removed from his control and sent off on such a dangerous wartime mission for nine days without his knowledge. The operations officer of the next echelon up the line of command, retired Col. Earl A. Butts of the Twenty-sixth Tactical Reconnaissance Wing (TRW), agreed with Colonel Whitlock. The two of them also refuted a number of technical details reported by Green, persuading me that the operation could not have taken place as described. For example, Colonel Butts wrote:

The RF-4C is like a beached whale when on the ground without its ground support. A very special 4,000 pound starting unit, liquid oxygen, 3,000 gallons of fuel from a specific type of fuel truck, and special oils and lubricants must be available to get it airborne again. For any operation at the rate of eight to ten sorties per day other equipment and support vehicles would have been required, including fire trucks, tugs, heavy steel towbars, forklifts, refrigerated storage for sensor materials, etc. . . . The base support required . . . would strain the resources of a hangarless desert facility such as he [Green] described. They would have had half of Tel Aviv out there working on runway lights, water lines, electric power generators, etc. . . . I would consider it slightly less complicated than General Doolittle's Tokyo raid.

Col. Lovic Hodnette, the commander of the Seventeenth TRS at Upper Heyford in 1967, the other unit allegedly involved, is deceased. The commander of the next echelon up, the Sixty-sixth TRW, retired Maj. Gen. Robert

J. Holbury, when asked said he had never heard of the operation and was incredulous that anyone would take the story seriously.

Moving horizontally, I asked the Israelis, putting the question to Maj. Gen. Shlomo Gazit, who was head of Israeli Military Intelligence Research and Assistance at the time. He wrote me on 8 March 1995 to say:

Having read Stephen Green's story I can only repeat what I have already told you—I know nothing of such an American involvement, and I am extremely doubtful if it could have taken place without my knowledge of it at the time or in later years.

There is one fact that makes this story almost impossible—the Israeli cabinet meeting that had approved the military offensive as well as the final “D” day and “H” hour was on Sunday, 4 June, i.e., some twenty-four hours after the squadron in Ramstein had already been alerted.

I will pass the story to Meir Amit, who was head of our Mossad at the time, for additional verification, but I have no doubt as to his answer.

On 16 March 1995, Major General Gazit sent me the following letter:

I have just received an answer from Meir Amit. Here is a translation of his message.

“Let me tell you loud and clear—the whole story is pure fabrication. I do not remember any such U.S. military presence in Israel at the time, nor any other presence that could explain the false story or rumor. I know of no Israeli airfield or airstrip that existed at the location given in the book.

“In order to be hundred percent sure, not trusting my memory anymore, I have checked your query with Moti Hod (the Israeli commander of the air force at the time, S.G.) and with others—all confirm my above statement that it is just a fabrication.”

I have received similar denials by other Israelis, including President Ezer Weizman, courtesy of Murray Gart, former chief correspondent of *Time* magazine. In particular, they support Amit's claim that there was no such airfield in Israel.

A further categoric denial was given in considerable detail at a 1992 conference⁷ by Richard Helms, who was CIA director in 1967. He said, in short, that the story was totally untrue, that neither Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara nor he had heard of it, and he did not understand how anyone could believe it. I eventually talked to McNamara himself on 23 February 1996. He said he was 100-percent sure that the mission never happened, but

if it had there must be a record of it somewhere. He suggested I ask the person who was secretary of the air force at the time, Harold Brown. I wrote to Brown on 3 June 1996, asking if he could shed any light on the matter, but have yet to hear from him.

There is also no knowledge of this operation among officials who were at the working level in the State Department, CIA, and the White House at the time. Alfred Atherton (then director of Arab-Israel affairs), Donald Bergus (director of Egypt affairs), Harold Saunders (Walt Rostow's deputy for the Near East at the National Security Council), and James Critchfield (director of the CIA's Near East division) all say they saw no sign of such an operation. Saunders said that Rostow denied any knowledge of it. Critchfield commented that he was running an ad hoc control group during the 1967 crisis and saw "everything." He saw nothing that would support Green's story and did not know why Green continued to pursue that "dead dog." I have also talked with the man who was the CIA station chief in Tel Aviv in 1967. He had never heard the story and commented that he could not imagine the Israelis letting any foreigners that close to their military operations.

All told, these statements make a convincing set of denials. Supported by the technical problems raised by Colonels Butts and Whitlock, they were enough to persuade me that the story was not true and that Green had been the victim of an intelligence fabricator, perhaps of a Soviet disinformation effort, because I could not conceive of anyone else who might have a motive for planting the story.

POSSIBLE LEADS?

Still, there was one item in the cable traffic that conceivably could have referred to this affair. On 30 May, Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol sent a message to President Johnson in which he mentioned "intelligence coordination" that Johnson had approved. There is no further explanation and no indication that it had anything to do with the matter under discussion.

I also had been in touch with Green, who spoke with evident sincerity of his conviction that his source, who claimed to be one of the photo technicians from the Seventeenth TRS, was telling the truth. He gave me the name and telephone numbers of his source, a man whom I shall call Gregory to protect his privacy, who had lived in the Virginia suburbs of Washington in 1983. The contact information was out of date by the time I got it, and after a fruitless effort to find Gregory listed in local telephone directories, past and present, I concluded that he must have been someone who had surfaced briefly to plant the story and then disappeared.

Meanwhile, Colonel Whitlock, who was monitoring my efforts from his home in Florida, located Gregory through his sources and called to give me his number. When I called Gregory, he said that the story was true and that he would be glad to talk to me and others about it. He did not sound like an agent provocateur. When I finally met him on 14 June 1996, he was very

convincing, gave what seemed like rational answers to the technical problems raised by Colonels Butts and Whitlock, and gave the names of six other photo technicians involved in the operation.

Colonel Whitlock called me on 20 June 1996 to say that he too had spoken with Gregory and that he was convinced that Gregory had been in the Seventeenth TRS and was knowledgeable about photo processing. His answers to questions were straightforward and plausible. Whitlock did not know how the mission was accomplished and could not believe that his own men were involved and did not tell him. Perhaps it was the TRS at Alconbury, England, that also had RF-4Cs. Planning would have had to involve the wing there, the one at Shaw air force base in North Carolina, or the Twenty-sixth TRW at Ramstein. A number of air force officers would have had to be witting. He added some details that he received from Gregory that said something about the degree of air force involvement. One was that Colonel Hodnette of the Seventeenth TRS was on the tarmac to see the detail off when they flew to Morón on 3 June. In other words, the men were not spirited out of their unit as the Green account implies. The other was that their briefers at Morón were a lieutenant colonel, a major, and a civilian. Gregory could not swear that the RF-4Cs were from the Thirty-eighth TRS, but that was what he had been told at Morón.

After hearing this from Colonel Whitlock, I was prepared to believe Gregory, despite the denials I had found so convincing. But I wanted some corroboration from other members of the detail from Upper Heyford or from the officers and men from Ramstein. But there, Col. Whitlock and I struck

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out. Via the National Telephone Directory I did locate the man who Gregory said was the noncommissioned officer in charge of the detail, but he had had a stroke and had no memory of the period in question. Also, Colonel Whitlock located Col. Phillip Harvell, who was the assistant operations officer of the Seventeenth TRS, and Col. Carlos Higgins, who was in charge of "Recce Tech," the photographic side of the Seventeenth squadron's activities. Both denied any knowledge of the operation and did not think it could have occurred without their knowledge. Colonel Higgins then inserted a brief note about the "Recce Mystery" in the December 1996 issue of a newsletter he sends to some 800 former air force officers who were in the reconnaissance field, asking those who had any knowledge of the operation to get in touch with Whitlock. To date, no one has. Several people with no personal knowledge of the operation have contacted him on the Internet with suggestions about other people to ask, but Whitlock's follow-up queries have produced no confirmation.

There was, however, one piece of supporting testimony. On 19 November 1996, I spoke to Bruce Lee, who was Green's editor at William Morrow. He confirmed Green's statement to me that he, Lee, had spoken with a former air force official who had confirmed that the operation had taken place.

He said that even if he could recall the name of the official, he would feel bound not to divulge it. He later wrote (5 December 1996) to say that prior to the publication of the book, he had made more than twenty telephone calls to people named in Green's text, plus others in the State and Defense Departments, the CIA, and Congress, and that "one high-level government source, who asked not to be identified, said Green's story was true. Two other very senior intelligence types, who also did not wish to be identified, said that they believed the confirmation I had received from the government official." Lee is the author of two books on intelligence and has had twenty-five years of journalistic experience dealing with the defense and foreign affairs community in Washington. He sounded serious and well-informed, and I took his comments seriously. If another participant in the operation who could confirm Gregory's story could be found, I would have something to go on.

On 25 November 1996, I hosted a lunch attended by Gregory, Richard Helms, Harold Saunders, William Quandt, and E. J. Applewhite, a former CIA official. Gregory gave some interesting details about how the story got into print and the names of a few more individuals from the Seventeenth TRS, but no further information about how to locate the individuals he had said participated in the operation. He promised to see whether he could find any documents or photos relating to the Seventeenth TRS, but when I last spoke to him on 17 January 1997, he said that he had not had time to look. I have not heard from him since.

DENOUEMENT

Meanwhile, following the lunch, Ambassador Helms spoke to former Secretary of the Air Force Brown, who said he had never heard the story. Brown then spoke to the current undersecretary of the air force, who asked the air force historian, Richard Hallion, about the matter. His office began to look into it on 16 January 1997. Diane Putney and Sheldon Goldberg of that office located two retired sergeants mentioned by Gregory as having been on the detail. They have led us to three other former noncoms from the Seventeenth TRS who knew Gregory. All five of these men found the story incredible. Those who were told of Gregory's contention that he had served in Vietnam prior to coming to the Seventeenth and that his military specialty was photo intelligence were unanimous in denying both claims. The following summarizes their other comments (I have used only their first names to protect their identities):

SGT. Carl: Carl allegedly was on the detail. He told Putney that he remembered Gregory but that he, Carl, had never gone to Israel and thought the entire story was a fantasy. A researcher from the *New York Times* had called him about the story around 1983, and he had denied it then. The researcher had responded that of course he would do so because he was sworn to secrecy, and Carl had said that was nonsense. In any event, he said,

the Recce community was small enough that any operation like this would have become common knowledge very quickly. When I talked to Carl on 12 February, he told me essentially what he told Putney.

SGT. Thomas: Thomas also was allegedly on the detail. I talked to him on 12 February, too. He remembered Gregory but had never gone to Israel and did not think it was possible that such an operation could have taken place without other people in the organization knowing about it.

SGT. Frank: I talked to Frank on 5 March. He was not one of the men named as being on the detail but had been Gregory's supervisor. He was incredulous when I told him the story and said it would have been impossible for Gregory to disappear for the period in question without his knowledge.

SGT. Willard: Colonel Whitlock talked to Willard on 6 March. Willard, a retired master sergeant, thought Green's tale was a "cock and bull story." He remembered Gregory well and said that Gregory had an active imagination and was a "bullshit artist." He produced a set of orders showing that Gregory had been sent to Morón in October, not June, 1967.

SGT. Albert: Albert was not listed as being on the detail. He is an unofficial historian of the Seventeenth TRS who has kept in touch with people and has photos and documents from the period in question. I spoke to him in early March. He said that the story was nonsense and that he was going to call Gregory and ask him about it. On 12 March I called to ask him what Gregory had said. The following is from my memo summarizing our talk:

Albert said he had called Gregory on 8 March. After exchanging pleasantries and reminiscing, Albert told Gregory he had read the chapter on the Sinai operation in *Taking Sides*. Gregory said he too had seen it and found it interesting. He had nothing to do with it. He knew that it was being attributed to him, but he did not know anything about it. There was some ambassador who was asking questions about the subject. He could not recall his name but had it in his files. Albert said he thought it was a total fabrication. Gregory said it could be, he didn't know. Albert asked who Stephen Green was. There was a long pause and Gregory changed the subject.

It is evident that Gregory did serve in the Seventeenth TRS as a photo technician (not as an intelligence specialist). He did go to Morón at least once, in the fall of 1967. This could have given him some of the atmospheric and technical details he provided. No documentary evidence of any sort to support the story has been provided, and there is unanimous denial of the incident from both American and Israeli officials, some of whom would have had to be aware of such an operation.

There remains Lee's assertion that an American official confirmed the story to him. Lacking the name of that official, it is impossible to pursue that lead, but I must confess to considerable skepticism about it. Anything is possible, particularly in the Middle East, but unless that official can be located and confirm the story, explain how it was done and by whom, and have his information corroborated in turn, or unless we can find someone who can prove that he accompanied Gregory on the mission—and I do not believe we can do any of those things—I think we must conclude that this is a mare's nest—a hoax. That conclusion is strengthened by Gregory's denial to Albert of any knowledge of the affair when he in fact had been the source of it and has been speaking freely, and with what appeared to be sincerity, to me and others about it. His motive remains to be established, but he told us during our luncheon conversation in November 1996 that he had once told the story to a girl in order to impress her. He certainly has a faculty for doing that well.

NOTES

1. William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington and Berkeley: Brookings Institution with University of California Press, 1993); William B. Quandt, "Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color Was the Light?" *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 198-228.
2. Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
3. Andrew Cockburn and Leslie Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
4. Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *1967: al-Insifjar* [1967: The explosion] (Cairo: Markaz al-Ahram, 1990).
5. See, for instance, Richard B. Parker, "The June War: Whose Conspiracy," *JPS* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1992), pp. 5-21, and the report on a 1992 conference on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the war: Richard B. Parker ed., *The Six Day War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).
6. Stephen Green, *Taking Sides* (New York: William Morrow Press, 1984), pp. 204-10.
7. See Parker, *The Six Day War*.